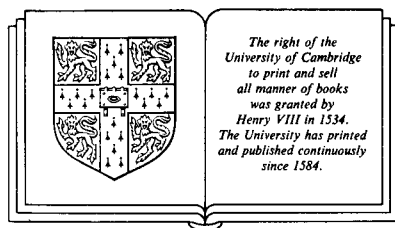


THE ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION OF WAR COMMUNISM, 1918–1921

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I

Introduction

I.1 THE LITERATURE ON WAR COMMUNISM

A large number of scholars have been concerned with the history of war communism in the Soviet Union. Broadly, two interpretations have emerged. The first, which originated in the twenties, when the political implications of the revolution were still being worked out, tends to focus on the ideological origins of the new system. The second, which is the result of a cooler perspective on past events, tends to emphasize the emergency character of the economic measures adopted in connection with the civil war and relegates the ideological aspect to *ex post facto* rationalizations.

A characteristic of the first kind of interpretation is the lack or scattered nature of evidence to prove the point of ideological bias or inspiration of the economic policy adopted in the early years of the revolution. There is no systematic scrutiny of the Marxist literature produced before and after the revolution, and whenever any attempt in this direction is made, the reader is confronted with limited excerpts and with a literal interpretation of the content, deprived of historical perspective. Economic policy is often confused with declaration of principles. Vice versa, excessive focus on emergency as the immediate cause of all measures in the economic field tends to a neglect of the impact of the ideological framework which conditioned the number of possible choices and produced a bias in the evaluation of effective choices.

These remarks apply to the Western as well as to the Soviet literature. A peculiarity which is common to both is the emphasis on a single explanatory key for all sorts of events affecting economic organization, either the Marxist ideology incarnated in the party leadership or the civil war interpreted as an exogenous, objective factor conditioning economic choices. What is striking in the Soviet literature is the sacrifice of a dialectical interpretation of the continuous changes which characterized war communism in all fields, in favour of a deterministic approach resting

on the assumption of Lenin's exclusive role and infallibility. The Stalinist purges of the thirties, which removed from the political scene most of the communist leaders of war communism, thus depriving history of their specific contributions, partially explain the bias that even modern Soviet literature maintains on this subject. But there is an additional element. The effort to build an epic of the Soviet revolution, emphasizing its success and minimizing its mistakes, corresponds to the need of intellectuals who have not renounced the Marxist credo to identify themselves with those pages of history full of enthusiasm, sacrifice, idealism and hope, which, after the ideological crisis opened by the repudiation of the Stalinist period, still maintain the appeal of a unifying element for the several sects of Marxist derivation, whensoever their divorce from Soviet orthodoxy may be dated.

Because of an opposite ideological bias, as well as of partial information and lack of adequate methodology, most of the Western literature places a particular emphasis on Lenin's impact on economic choices, leaving in the shade the influence of the economic leadership as well as the traditions and legacies of the Russian economy and society. Study of the actual working of the new Soviet system suggests that both sympathizers and opponents tend to attribute too much to Lenin and to the hasty pamphlet activity which preceded and accompanied the Red October, rather than focusing attention on the Russian Marxist ideology as such, which was the filter through which an entire new political leadership screened the immediate goals and the means to attain them. The myth of the leader is likely to obscure the complexities of the decision-making process and transform it into something coordinated, harmonious, predetermined and unidirectional; in fact, most decisions were the result of a precarious compromise between antagonistic drives and the ephemeral mirror of an anxious search for stability and consolidation of power in a shifting context.

A further difficulty which the literature has not yet been able to overcome is that of discriminating between immediate goals of the government's policy and a proclaimed orthodoxy of Marxist principles used as charisma to gain uncritical consensus. This practice, which still strikes many observers as analogous with religious attitudes, should not lead us to take for granted the dogmatism of the choices, but should rather be an incentive for confronting concrete issues with their immediate objectives and constraints and an incentive to evaluate in such a perspective the process of decision-making. The Party Congress debates which remained quite alive even during the most acute phases of the civil war, bearing no analogy with the miserable conformism of the Stalinist period and the present mode, are more instructive for a correct appraisal

of the alternatives than is mere reference to the ideological matrix of the protagonists, though the latter must not be disregarded.

This survey of the literature on war communism is an experiment in the search for bias – though possibly it is not going to cancel out the bias of the author – rather than a comprehensive scrutiny of the existing works on this topic.*

1.2 SOVIET LITERATURE

Two approaches may be distinguished in the Soviet literature on war communism. The first focuses on the heroic performance of the revolution, on the originality of the Soviet system, on the coherence of the 'ensemble' of policies aimed at the rapid construction of socialism. The alternative approach, developed in the thirties, tends to appraise the features of war communism as a forced temporary break in the Leninist plan of construction of socialism, due to exogenous factors like civil war and foreign intervention. Recent access to archive materials seems to have provided support for the extension and deepening of both interpretations. On one side, some of the literature has tried to find additional arguments to distinguish even more sharply than before the first months of Soviet power from the crucial period of civil war, by identifying in the former policies an anticipation of NEP. On the other side, the axiom of the exogeneity of civil war has been questioned by a subtle reading of Bolshevik policies which focuses on their ideological roots. Thus a thesis of the continuity of the policies which ended up in the organization of the war communism economy emerges. The novelty of this approach in Soviet literature, combined with the availability of archive documents,

*For a broader panorama on Soviet revolution as viewed by some minor, though keen observers, the reader may find of interest the following: L. Pasvolsky, *The Economics of Communism*, New York, 1921, who focused on the gap between theory and reality in some fields, like income distribution (p. 16); J. Lescure, *La Révolution Russe et le Bolchevisme*, Paris, 1929, who grasped that the essence of war communism was the logic of distribution (p. 222); N. Zvorikine, *La Révolution et le Bolchevisme en Russie*, Paris, 1920, for whom the Bolshevik doctrine has never been implemented, nor had the government any principles (p. 211); P. Ryss, *L'Expérience Russe*, Paris, 1922, who was impressed by the Bolsheviks as true children of Russia, psychologically estranged from the Marxian evolutionary theory and convinced that the light would come from the East (pp. 119–20). For both G. Welter, *Histoire de la Russie Communiste 1917–1935*, Paris, 1935 (p. 97) and D. Gavronsky, *Le Bilan du Bolchevisme Russe*, Paris, 1920, coercion rather than persuasion was the necessary issue of the Bolshevik doctrine; for G. Aleksinskij, *Les Effets économiques et sociaux de la Révolution Bolcheviste et son échec*, Bruxelles, 1920, the backwardness of the country was the main hindrance to efforts to improve economic standards (p. 20). L. H. Guest, *The Struggle for Power in Europe (1917–1921)*, London, 1921, p. 81, gives a description of Communist Party members as picked soldiers enjoying considerable privileges, but called to volunteer for dangerous and disagreeable duties.

opens a new perspective not only on war communism, but also on the origins and nature of the Soviet system.

The most important theoretical synthesis of the war communist system is the *Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda* (*The Economics of the Transformation Period*), written by Bukharin, a direct protagonist of the revolution, and published early in 1920. Bukharin emphasizes the impact of a given stage of development on economic organization with regard to methods of management and means of labour discipline. Rationalizing the Russian experience, he affirms that the initial phase of the revolutionary process is one of destruction, which corresponds to the seizure of the strategic points of the economy. The break-up of the former system into a number of factory-committees is the outcome of the political struggle for power. Such a phase is a necessary one, since the bourgeoisie and the technical intelligentsia have no interest in the reorganization of production. But this system is not the best from a technical point of view. In wartime, argues Bukharin, one-man management is the most concrete and condensed form of proletarian administration of industry. One-man management should not imply restriction of class rights or reduction of the role of class organizations. Likewise, the replacement of the principle of electivity from below by the principle of selection from above of the managerial staff should not be a hindrance to the further development of a collective-socialist form of management and control of economic life. This is because the dictatorship of the proletariat is the guarantee that leaders may not go beyond the functions they are expected to perform on behalf of the proletariat.¹ But, how would a society based on the methods of war communism during the transition period evolve towards a socialist society, where no coercion will be needed and the highest form of 'administration of things' will replace the 'administration of people'? Bukharin envisages such a development, but does not explain why and how it should occur. The most serious shortcoming of the *Ekonomika* is its failure to draw a clear distinction between the disequilibrium period and the period following the installation of equilibrium. In Marxist terms, this deficiency, which has been stressed by one of the most serious studies of Bukharin's personality,² would be regarded as a product of his use of a mechanist, non-dialectical method.³ The following excerpt is an example:

The transformation of the process of creating surplus value into a process of systematic satisfaction of social needs finds its expression in the regrouping of the relation of production, in spite of the formal maintenance of the same place in the hierarchical system of production, which, as a whole, bears a different character, the character of the dialectical negation of the capitalist structure; and which leads in so far as it destroys the social caste character of the hierarchy, to the abolition of the hierarchy as a whole.⁴

There is no place in Bukharin's concept of the process of 'systematic satisfaction of social needs' for the possible evolution of the new relations of production into institutions endowed with their own rationality and, consequently, no place for the potential development of antagonism between them. Thus, for Bukharin, the crux of the matter becomes one of correct methods of management and training for administrative tasks:

in further phases of development, insofar as the positions of the working class as a ruling class have stabilized themselves and insofar as a secure foundation for a competent administration of industry has arisen the base of which is already a group of selected workers-administrators, insofar as, on the other hand, the technological intelligentsia turns back like the lost son into the process of production, insofar does the function of administration separate itself from the function of schooling for this administration.⁵

The problem of constructing an alternative society thus becomes only a technical problem. Since Bukharin does not see the possibility that the interests of workers as such may not coincide with the goals of their managers, that is, since his analysis rules out the possibility of this or any other form of antagonism occurring in the new system and becoming the possible catalyst of future evolution (or revolution), the only dynamic element capable of transforming the negative power of the proletarian anarchy into a conscious will is the coercive power of the state. In order to transform the spontaneous disequilibrium process caused by revolution into an equilibrium phase, a social and conscious regulator is needed, through which commodities are transformed into products.⁶ There are two reasons for coercion in the transition period. First, a re-education process is required to eliminate the residuals of the former individualistic, non-proletarian mentality, and the harshness of this process is proportional to the former social status of those concerned. Second, the lack of unity of the proletariat necessitates a process of revolutionary education, in the sense of a steady raising of the working class to the level of the vanguard. Bukharin argues that the presumption of the unity of the working class may be held only in theory, whereas, in practice, the imprint of the capitalist commercial world is such as to affect even wide circles of the working class and its vanguard. Coercion must be imposed on the working class from outside, while self-discipline applies within the party.⁷ Bukharin does not see that, by taking his own theory to its logical conclusion, the party is bound to become a new caste. The separation between ends and means is taken for granted. Bukharin admits that freedom of personality (*svoboda lichnosti*)⁸ will exist only in the communist society. In the mean time:

From a broader point of view, i.e. from the point of view of a historical scale of greater scope, proletarian compulsion in all its forms, from executions to

compulsory labour constitutes, as paradoxically as it may sound, a method of the formation of a new communist humanity from the human material of the capitalist epoch.⁹

How long the transition period will last, Bukharin does not say. The legacies of the former system which made it easier for the revolution to succeed – a weak state apparatus, the limited diffusion of capitalism, the agrarian economy and military defeat – turn out to be the major hindrances to its further development. In a tragic anticipation of the ideological grounds for the Stalinist policy of the thirties, Bukharin affirms that the large peasantry which helped the proletariat to gain victory is going to be the greatest obstacle in the period of construction of new productive relations.¹⁰

The ideological requisites of the new society are the only novelty of the revolution in the first phase. Bukharin maintains that the tasks of the proletariat in power are not dissimilar to the tasks of the bourgeoisie in the phase of expanded reproduction: frugality with all resources, and so systematic utilization and maximal centralization, since capitalism has already prepared the specific methods of labour organization.¹¹ Bukharin agrees with Kritsman's periodization of the revolutionary process into a sequence of ideological, political, economic and technical phases. This periodization puts the emphasis on the process of formation of the 'consciousness' of the working class as the future leading class. The revolution of technical methods, the change and rapid improvement of the rationalized social techniques, come later.¹² Conversely, Bukharin reproaches Tsyperovich, a prestigious Russian trade unionist, for having misunderstood the originality of the new system. Against Tsyperovich's focus on the continuity of the new organization with respect to the former bourgeois system, Bukharin stresses that 'our productive associations are a completely *different* organizational apparatus' and that 'they have grown up *on the skeleton* of the dead, decayed, disintegrated capitalist apparatus' (Bukharin's italics).¹³ The problem of filiation of the new institutions from the former is not explored, because Bukharin considers the political and ideological dimension as the ultimate check on the correspondence of institutions to revolutionary goals. The mutual influence of structure and superstructure, which was a most powerful tool of analysis in Marxism, is lost completely in the post-revolutionary accounts of Soviet history.

Bukharin's approach was not an isolated one among the Bolsheviks. His essay was carefully read by Lenin, who praised several parts of it, including the chapter on extra-economic coercion.¹⁴ Nor was any significant disagreement expressed on Bukharin's appraisal of war

communism from the ranks of the communist leadership. In reality, Bukharin's conclusion on the need for coercion was the logical outcome of the rejection of the Marxian method of analysis as a useful tool for the understanding not only of the functioning of capitalism, but also of the transformation period following the revolution. Bukharin (but he was not the only one) interpreted the change of power as the crucial element of the new system, whereas Marx assumed the transformation of social relations, i.e. the change of power, to be the consequence of the development of the productive relations, i.e. the final phase of a process of growth. The extemporaneous nature of the Bolshevik Revolution with respect to the Marxian hypothesis did not bring about an explicit revision of Marxism, but rather an adaptation of it to the Russian reality. Any phenomenon which did not fit the model of a new society intended first of all as the negation of capitalism was interpreted as a residual of past behaviour, mentality and feelings. These residuals were not considered the expression of real relations, but mere appearances of them. The chapter on the economic categories of capitalism in the transition period is an instructive indication of such an approach to the Soviet economic system. This chapter was written in collaboration with Iu. Piatakov. The authors rejected the possibility of making use of the concepts of commodity, value, price and wage in the economy of the transition period. The argument was as follows: the commodity as a category presupposes the social division of labour, or its fragmentation, which imply the lack of a conscious regulator of the economic process. To the extent that the irrationality of the production process disappears, that is a conscious social regulator takes the place of spontaneity, the commodity loses its commodity character and turns into a product.¹⁵ About value the authors argued in a different way. The law of value presumes a state of equilibrium. Value is the law of equilibrium of the 'anarcho-mercantile' system. Therefore, it is not adequate in the period of transition, when commodity production disappears and there is no equilibrium. It follows that price becomes a form deprived of content, a pseudo-form, totally detached from value. This fact is connected with the collapse of the monetary system. Money as such goes through a process of self-negation. Inflation and the distribution of money tokens independent of, and inversely proportionate to, product distribution are expressions of the annihilation of money, which ceases to be the general equivalent and becomes only a conventional and highly imperfect sign of product circulation. The wage keeps only its external, monetary form, which will disappear together with money. Since wage labour disappears through the transformation of the working class into the dominant class, workers will receive, not a wage, but an allocation proportional to the contri-

bution of their work to society. Bukharin's conclusion is that as the natural (i.e. non-monetary) system of economic relations grows, the corresponding ideological categories will also explode and it will become necessary to go over to a natural economic type of reasoning.¹⁶

Bukharin offers a rationalization of the economic organization of war communism, but not a convincing one. No hint is given about the new rules or regulators which society has to employ to get things done. He mentions the conscious social regulator taking the place of the anarchy of the market, a sort of planning board, but no attention is paid to the criteria by which production, supply and distribution should be regulated to satisfy the needs of society.

In the postscript to the German edition of his book, Bukharin declared that he had not been writing an economic history of Soviet Russia, but a general theory of the transition period. Therefore the principles stated in the *Ekonomika* did not need to be revised in the light of the new economic policy undertaken after war communism. 'I openly admit (said Bukharin in polemics against German Social Democracy) objectively speaking, the inevitably destructive effect of the revolution as such.'¹⁷ The central point of Bukharin's essay was, in fact, the 'negation' side of the revolution. However, evidence for this had been abundantly drawn from the Soviet experience, the generalization of which could not but provide a very strange model of the first phase of the revolution. The postscript, written in December 1921, reduced the effective significance of Bukharin's essay. When he wrote the *Ekonomika*, Bukharin believed that the phase of transition represented by war communism was going to last, with all its implications in the economic field, until the world revolution put an end to the fundamental task of repression of the bourgeoisie. Only then would 'the externally coercive norms' become extinct.¹⁸

Bukharin's message went beyond war communism. The cold portrait of a society based on coercion, the only dynamic force in the transition phase,¹⁹ was the definite legacy that war communism impressed on the theoreticians of the new society. An ideology which succeeded in embodying coercion as a means of development was going to provide the communist leadership with justification for all sorts of deviation from the original ideals.

Bukharin's *Ekonomika* does not say much about the criteria of economic organization, since the goal of the essay is to show the need for the suppression of all former categories and criteria of performance. A better source of information about the economic organization of war communism is Kritsman's *Geroicheskii period Velikoi Russkoi Revoliutsii*.²⁰ Kritsman, who was first the head of the chemical section, and then head of the Utilization Committee of VSNKh, the Supreme Council of the

National Economy, elaborated his essay as a challenge to Lenin's repudiation of the war economic organization at the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March 1921. Lenin acknowledged that mistakes had been made in the economic programme, but argued that war had imposed its own necessity. War communism – said Lenin at the congress – was not a harmonious system.²¹ Kritsman evoked, instead, a glorious image of the recent past. 'In reality, the so-called "war communism" has been the first great example of a proletarian–natural economy... *an experiment in the first steps of transition to socialism.*' Kritsman added that war communism was by no means an error made by a people or by a class, but 'though not clearly and with well known perversities, an *anticipation of the future*, a breaking through of this future into the present (now already gone), made possible thanks to the exceptional and specific conditions of development of the Russian Revolution'.²² Kritsman singled out two peculiarities of the war communism system, the principle of collegiality and the principle of rationality. The multiform reality of war communism was forced into an all-encompassing synthesis. Forgetting the diffusion of one-man management in the militarized sector of industry, Kritsman affirmed that collegiality spread over all forms of the economy: in organization of management and labour remuneration, in collective supply and reward, in collective exchange between town and countryside. Neglecting the overlapping of institutions operating in the same field, which during war communism was also the outcome of rapid changes, Kritsman asserted that the rationale of war communism was a new principle of organization, by which 'what is necessary will be realized; what is not, will be abolished'.²³ In conformity with Bukharin's theory, Kritsman considered positive the tendency of the new system to abolish fetishistic relations, that is, the market, monetary and credit relations, a fact which went along with the formation of the natural economy.

Written when the first steps towards NEP had already been made, Kritsman's book was an apologia on behalf of those who had given their devotion to the revolutionary drive. Kritsman's account of the war communist organization, highly commendable as it is for the amount of data and information supplied, embodies the bias of any heroic chronicle which justifies the success of military operations fought in such a tough context that only self-denial and faith appear to be responsible for victory. The effort of rationalization is here the source of a voluntaristic approach to the origin of the Soviet system. This seems excessive, even taking into account the ideological drive of its protagonists. Signs of this approach may still be found in some later literature.²⁴ The party history of 1930 interpreted war communism as a system of measures directed toward the

most rapid construction of socialism.²⁵ Its successor of 1938 still focused on the initiative of the leadership, though its goals were reshaped in a cruder way more consistent with the developments of the Stalinist regime; the Soviet leadership was determined from the beginning to implement a communist policy, identified with state control over production, distribution and trade with labour mobilization.²⁶ This approach ignores the conflictive nature of the transition from collective management to one-man management and the controversial nature of several decisions, such as the structure of the administration, labour conscription, the extension of nationalization and so forth.

The revision of the voluntaristic approach to the origin of the organization of the Soviet economy began in the late twenties. Emphasis began to be put on exogenous factors. The *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* of 1928 presents war communism as a war economy employing centralization as a means of achieving military efficiency and gradually evolving under the constraints imposed by war.²⁷ Kritsman's approach is turned upside down. Kritsman emphasized the derivation of the political system from the economic system: the political system was organized after the economic system and, likewise, had been built upon a 'productive' principle.²⁸ The *Entsiklopediia* concludes that 'the historical meaning of war communism consists essentially in the fact that, by operating on the basis of military and political power, it mastered the economic basis'.²⁹ The food-procurement policy is considered a development of the Provisional Government's policy, which decreed the grain monopoly in 1917. The problem of control over distribution is indicated as the crux of economic policy in a context of falling output. The point is made that 'war communism' intended as a system never came fully to life, since sizeable amounts of commodities flowed through the channels of the black market, which the authorities tolerated.³⁰

The cooler perspective (from 1928) of the early days of the revolution, as compared with the passionate account of Kritsman, does provide a better framework for a critical evaluation of war communism. But some ideological factors, which were important in party circles, are not given appropriate weight. Nor does the neglect of the social pressures, which interposed definite obstacles of a political as well as a material nature with regard to the efforts of directing the economy from a single centre, seem justified. Excessive focus on necessity deprives history of its human dimensions; ideals, goals, mentality, and passions provided the grounds for what Lenin defined in March 1921 as the mistakes of war communism.

The tendency to confine the war communism experience to a mere military policy, justified exclusively by the exigencies of war, emerged fully in the historiography of the thirties. Lomakin identifies war

communism with compulsion, the essence of which had been the extraction of the surplus and even part of the necessities from the peasantry to finance war. Following Stalin's interpretation, Lomakin sharply rejects the thesis that elements of the war communism economy were present before the autumn of 1918, and identifies the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Defence as the institutional framework, created in November 1918 in connection with war, where the policy of war communism was originated.³¹

The Soviet interpretation of the necessary nature of war communism could and did find support in Lenin's words. In the margin of the plan of substitution a tax in kind for the surplus appropriation system, Lenin wrote 'difficult' (*trudno*)! This indicates that what Lenin said about the former economic policy at the Tenth Congress of the party was inspired by the necessity of finding a consensus for change in a hostile environment. It was Lenin who for the first time defined the economic organization of 1918–20 as 'war' communism, when he wrote the draft of his pamphlet 'The Tax in Kind'. By this device Lenin emphasized the transitory, military nature of the system, to justify the need for its transformation into '*proper* (Lenin's italics) socialist foundations'.³² In 'The Tax in Kind' Lenin proposed the first 'necessity' interpretation of war communism:

... a peculiar war communism ... was forced on us by extreme want, ruin and war ... it was not, and could not be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat.

It was 'a makeshift', he concluded.³³ At the same time, at the Tenth Congress of the party, Lenin acknowledged that 'quite a few mistakes' had been made in carrying out the former policy.³⁴ Through this politically brilliant 'reconciliation of opposites', Lenin was able to strike simultaneously at the Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries and Kautskyists, and at the Workers' Opposition, against which most of his efforts were directed at the Party Congress.³⁵ If war communism had been necessary, it could not be mistaken. Vice versa, if mistakes had been made in the choice of policies, the chosen policies were not necessary, but on the contrary, perverse. Lenin laid the foundations for both interpretations of war communism. But the literature on war communism, particularly the Soviet literature, preferred to focus on emergency. This approach stimulates an excessive emphasis on the exogeneity of the factors which affected economic organization, and relegates to the role of accidents the elements which would help to clarify the motivations and goals of specific measures. The focus on the rationality of necessity lays the basis for an interpretation of facts according to the theory of 'deviation', which